

# Milksnake

*Lampropeltis triangulum*

By Lee Lamb

The milksnake got its name because people once believed the reptiles sucked milk from cow udders. Of course, such behavior is anatomically impossible for the snakes, which lack lips, and certainly would not be tolerated by cows. The likely source of the myth is the fact that milksnakes do frequent barns, though in search of mice and rats.

Milksnakes—like all Montana snake species except the prairie rattlesnake—are nonpoisonous and relatively passive. They act aggressively only if they feel threatened. Like so many snake species, the milksnake is an efficient rodent and insect hunter that helps keep the pests in check.

## Identification

Milksnakes are slender, medium-sized snakes 16 to 28 inches long, with males slightly longer than females. Straddling the pale body are 22 to 32 red-to-orange markings bordered by black and separated by whitish or yellowish bands that run the length of the body. The head is black with a white or yellow underside. The rounded snout is often dappled with black. Juvenile milksnakes are miniature versions of adults, but with subdued coloring.

The milksnake's bright colors make it easily distinguishable from other Montana snakes. However, it closely resembles the poisonous coral snake found in southern Arizona, Texas, and southeastern states.

## Range and habitat

Milksnakes are the most widespread snake in North America. Twenty-five subspecies roam across the eastern and central United States to the Rocky Mountains, with Montana marking the northwestern limit of the snakes' range. The pale milksnake is the

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subspecies found in Montana. It inhabits sagebrush-grassland habitat and ponderosa pine savannah with sandy soils, mostly in or near rocky outcrops and hillsides in the state's eastern and central regions.

## Life cycle

Milksnakes typically reach sexual maturity at age three or four. They mate after emerging from overwintering dens in April and May. Courtship and copulation often in-

sticks its tongue into two holes in the top of its mouth, called the Jacobson's organ, to allow its brain to determine if the scent belongs to a potential meal. Milksnakes are opportunistic hunters—preying on small mammals (including young in a burrow nest), other snakes, lizards, birds, reptile and bird eggs, worms, and insects. They gobble small prey whole and, like boas and pythons, constrict larger prey until it suffocates.

## Habits and behavior

Milksnakes don't actually hibernate, but they do overwinter in dens starting in October or November, emerging in April or May. The den can be an embankment, rock crevice, or abandoned rodent burrow and may contain other snake species, including rattlers.

Milksnakes are most active at dusk and night. During the heat of a summer day, they seek shade in burrows or under rocks and logs. People will occasionally spot milksnakes during daytime when the ground is wet and cool.

## Status and management

In Montana, the milksnake is considered a state "species of concern," primarily because biologists lack information about its abundance, range, habitat requirements, and foraging behavior.

Among proposals for managing milksnakes: Protect known overwintering dens, educate Montanans about the value of milksnakes as pest controllers (to prevent unnecessary slaying), and restrict or regulate commercial harvest for the pet trade. 🐍

**Scientific name**  
*Lampropeltis* is Greek for "bright shield," referring to the shiny dorsal scales.  
*Triangulum*, Latin for "triangle," may refer to the snake's three colors.

clude chasing, touching, and side-by-side alignment, as well as biting by aggressive males. Females lay a clutch of 4 to 13 oval white eggs in burrows or under cover in late June and early July. Sometimes several females lay eggs in the same location. The hatchlings emerge six to nine weeks later, fully capable of taking care of themselves.

Milksnakes typically live six to ten years in the wild. Their few natural predators include coyotes, badgers, and raptors.

## Food

Like all snakes, the milksnake persistently flicks its forked tongue to "taste" or "smell" food by picking up odors and particles in the air. When an odor is detected, the snake